

VZCZCXRO4067  
RR RUEHLMC  
DE RUEHYE #1439/01 3520318  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
R 180318Z DEC 07  
FM AMEMBASSY YEREVAN  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6752  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0526  
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHDC  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0472

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001439

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/16/2017  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [OSCE](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: BRIEFING THE PRESIDENCY ON EXIT POLLS, IFES/CEC  
PROBLEMS, OSCE/ODIHR INVITATION

Classified By: CDA Joseph Pennington, reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: USAID briefed presidential aide Vigen Sargsian, at government request, about plans for a USAID/IRI-sponsored exit poll for the upcoming presidential election. Sargsian pressed for more details about the methods and partners involved, and expressed great skepticism both personally and on President Kocharian's part. He admitted that the PM's public embrace of the proposal complicated the president's desire to block it. Polchief took the opportunity to raise the CEC's chairman's refusal of USAID/IFES training for pollworkers, as well as to ask about when Armenia's election observation invitation to OSCE/ODIHR would be forthcoming. END SUMMARY

12. (C) PRESIDENCY OUT OF THE LOOP AND ANNOYED: On the margins of a meeting about Radio Liberty, presidential chief of staff Armen Gevorkian complained to CDA that the Embassy had approached the prime minister to float the idea of an exit poll, before doing so with the presidency. He made clear that the presidency was disgruntled to learn of the idea from the media. President Kocharian was much less inclined to support the idea than the Prime Minister -- though Gevorkian suggested that as a candidate himself, the PM had little choice but to agree. Gevorkian demanded that USAID return and brief presidency staffer Vigen Sargsian on the details of the proposal by no later than COB December 13, so that Kocharian would be prepared to discuss the matter at his weekly Friday meeting with the PM.

13. (C) ...AND DISLIKES EXIT POLL IDEA: USAID Mission Director, democracy programs director, and polchief called on Vigen Sargsian December 13 to go over the exit polling proposal in more detail. Sargsian asked probing questions about who would conduct the surveys, how many interviewers there would be, at how many polling places, and which local partner(s) might be involved. He also asked where in the CIS had exit polls been done before, and with what success. His questions betrayed a deeply skeptical attitude toward the concept. Eventually, he shared outright his "personal opinion" that exit polling is an inappropriate political tool for Armenia. He raised issues of voter confusion, voter deception, nefarious bystanders over-hearing voters' responses to polltakers and retaliating, and general concerns about lack of confidentiality. At one point, Sargsian cast vague aspersions on USAID, IRI, and Gallup's local partner, the Armenian Sociological Association, for alleged political bias. Later on, he insisted that local partners must be used, because it would be unacceptable for foreign powers to set themselves up as arbiter of Armenia's election. Sargsian commented that OSCE/ODIHR -- despite flaws and failings that he alleged on ODIHR's part -- was the internationally agreed mechanism for the international community to review elections. Adding that exit polling would be a new intrusion

of the international community into elections, Sargsian mentioned that had we first approached the Presidency about exit polls, the president would have said no. However, since the PM had announced support for it, the Presidency was left in a delicate position vis-a-vis the PM, and the two would have to agree on how to proceed.

¶4. (C) TOOL FOR RABBLE-ROUSING?: Vigen Sargsian fretted that in the event that the exit poll showed a different outcome than the official results, that data would immediately be used as a club by radical opposition elements to whip up civil disorder against the government. We inquired why the poll results should be different from the outcome, pointing out that the whole point of the exercise was to be able to validate the official tally and assure Armenian voters that the outcome was correct. This should be a tool for stability, disproving false allegations of fraud. We pointed out that exit polling was a well-established science, supported by reams of scholarly literature and worldwide practice, and that Sargsian's concerns were unfounded. Sargsian was unwilling to be persuaded that the exit poll operation was sufficiently immune from manipulation to assured of a valid result. Meanwhile, he said he still did not have enough detail about the proposed methodology to satisfy the president. He asked that the IRI/Gallup experts come to brief him on their next Yerevan visit, which we agreed could be arranged the week of December 17.

¶5. (C) WE DIDN'T ASK PERMISSION: Sargsian chided again that the embassy had erred in going to the Prime Minister for approval of the exit poll proposal, when the PM was himself a candidate. He said we should have sought the president's permission. Polchief clarified that we had not, in fact, asked the PM for permission. After looking into it, our analysis had concluded that there was no law or regulation

YEREVAN 00001439 002 OF 002

governing exit polls in Armenia, and that we were free to mount such an exercise without any kind of formal government permission. Nonetheless, we also did not wish to keep secrets or spring surprises on the political scene, so had

SIPDIS

begun raising our plan with key government and political officials, starting with the prime minister. It had been the PM's choice immediately to publicize our intention before we had had the chance to raise it in other quarters. Sargsian said he "took the point" and said nothing further on that aspect.

¶6. (C) CEC NOT PLAYING WELL WITH IFES: We raised the separate issue of CEC Chairman Garegin Azaryan's cavalier dismissal (septel) of USAID implementer IFES' plans to provide training for pollworkers, as had been done before the May 2007 parliamentary election. Polchief noted that the CEC was within its rights, of course, to refuse U.S.-funded training. He said, however, that Azaryan's alternative plans for training looked inadequate to our experts. He also pointed out that if the CEC refused IFES training, we would have to make clear that U.S.-funded assistance in this area had terminated, and the CEC's programming was all its own. Sargsian was unfamiliar with the issue, but promised to call Azaryan to inquire about it.

¶7. (C) WHAT ABOUT THE ODIHR INVITATION?: We also pressed Sargsian on when the GOAM would issue its official invitation to OSCE/ODIHR to monitor the election. Sargsian insisted that this would be done "at the normal time." We pointed out that as far as we could tell the invitation was already growing late. Sargsian disagreed, but said he was not certain of the formal schedule. He assured us the invitation would most probably go out within a week or at most two

¶8. (C) COMMENT: It was clear to us that no amount of explanation, details, or persuasion was going to sway Sargsian in favor of allowing an exit poll. Less clear was

whether the normally more easy-going Sargsian's resolve on the point was a matter of personal conviction or simply of faithfully hewing to his bosses' policy line. The question of how the president and PM will square their different views -- to say nothing of how to explain it to the public if the president countermands the PM's public stance -- is a delicate one for Armenia's top two leaders to resolve. We were also struck by the strong implication that there had been absolutely no direct communication between the presidency and the prime minister's office on the issue. On this, at least, the two institutions seem on completely different pages, with the presidency's view steeped in combative paranoia. END COMMENT.  
PENNINGTON